# One, Simple Detail Changed

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# One, Simple Detail Changed

by CReed

Summary

Homecoming was supposed to be a time of reconnection and joy. Something to look forward to. Not for Nigel Lecter. Homecoming was always something to fear, to dread. A time when he had to stop running from the demons of his past, including the demon that wore his face. But Nigel would do anything for love, for his beautiful wife. And if Gabi thought meeting his family would help save theirs, then how could he refuse?

Plans of introducing his new family to the one he left behind nearly thirty years ago are thrown completely off-kilter. The life he worked so ruthlessly to obtain in Romania is put in jeopardy. His twin, a big part of why he left Lithuania in the first place, is now the only person who can help him before he loses everything. And, perhaps, the mysterious stranger he met on the train.

Love and family are worth killing for. Dying for. Nigel just isn't sure if he'll be counted among the casualties.

Notes

**Important Note:** While you don't have to read the first two stories in this series, *Mr. Lecter* and *Identical to the Ideal*, it'll probably make the experience overall more enjoyable. I also recommend reading the two short stories before this. There are some things in them that tie into this story. However, this can be read alone.

Once again, I am delving into the waters of this series. This has been a long time in the works and I finally feel confident enough to begin posting. It's been a blast returning to these characters and this particular world. I hope anyone passing by feels the same.

Please enjoy, dear readers!

# Chapter One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

### One, Simple Detail Changed

*“Will's tentative smile stayed hidden against Hannibal's neck. The grip he had on Hannibal felt desperate, frantic. Hannibal didn't ask what was obviously troubling him, content in the knowledge that Will would speak when he was ready.*

*'I think of meeting you differently, too,' Will murmured against bitten and bruised skin. 'No pain. No death. Completely myself. Would you ever have taken notice of me, without the blood between us?'*

*Hannibal's grip had to be painful but Will only settled closer, holding onto him tighter. 'In a pitch-black room filled with a million useless people, I would notice you.'*

*'I imagine finding you, before Nigel. How different it all could have been with just one, simple detail changed.'*

*'Somewhere else, it happened just that way.'*

*Will's laugh was watery, thick with unshed tears. 'Did we let ourselves be happy?'*

*Hannibal pulled Will away from his hiding place by a gentle handful of soft curls. He took in the shape of his face, the curve of his mouth, the sharp cut of his jaw. Already so familiar to him. Essential to him. He kissed lips stained by his own blood. 'Sometimes.'”*

~from *Identical to the Ideal*

## Part One:

## The Distraction

### Chapter One

Contrary to what many people thought, their personal opinions concerning him, he put a lot of work into what he did. People only saw the result of his efforts, not having a clue about the time and labor he put behind it all. An easy assumption to fall into. He made sure what he did looked fucking flawless. Dangerous. Tempting. Seductive. The kind of lifestyle he led, the persona he portrayed, made it all appear so easy. Exactly how he wanted it to.

The truth was far less glamorous. Numbers and files and meetings and negotiations and buyers and sellers—that wasn't as glitzy as the finished product. To have it all run like clockwork took a lot more than throwing his weight around and being terrifying to the right people. But who really wanted to know about the behind-the-scenes? The *book-keeping?*

*Scarface wasn't a classic because you got to watch Al Pacino file his taxes and organize spreadsheets for almost three hours.*

*Nigel Lecter sighed and leaned into his chair, stretching until his neck practically hung over the top of it and gave a satisfying pop before he slumped into the soft leather. He tossed his glasses onto his desk and rubbed at his eyes. That was it. No more paperwork. As the last program closed on his computer, he shoved away from his desk to stand at the window and light a cigarette. His daughter hadn't accompanied him today, but smoking near the open window was already a habit ingrained in him.*

*The day got away from him. Already noon. His last normal day, and he wasted it on numbers. A useless diversion. That's really what it was all about. Throwing himself into work, more so than usual. Hiding in his shitty south-side office. He didn't need a head doctor to know why. He could almost hear the ticking of a clock, counting down to an inevitable explosion. Counting down to cataclysm. No matter his choices, this was always going to happen and time had run out finally on his long delay. Putting it off, as far as he could, didn't do shit and now there was nothing left to do but deal with every irritation clamoring for his attention.*

*It was all getting away from him.*

*Nigel pushed that thought down, and several others like it, as he looked out at the city below. Bucharest wasn't something he ever planned on, but she belonged to him now. All her secrets and horror stories, her wild charm. That was what drew him, but not why he stayed. This was where everything began. The city where his life finally fucking changed for the better. And he would be leaving her—his fortified empire—behind for an extended period of time. Hopefully, this would all be over soon and things could go back to how they used to be.*

*Dour thoughts were gladly interrupted as the door to his office opened. "Don't you have a plane to catch?"*

*"Train, actually."*

*Nigel didn't turn from the gritty beauty of Bucharest's bustling streets and dark corners until he had his fill of his cigarette. He was allowed only half a pack a day now. He would savor the goddamn thing. When he finally looked, Darko was sitting on the leather couch across the room. Black Armani and gleaming Rolex driving the point further that his business partner didn't belong in the dingy office he was lounging in. As much of an outsider as Nigel. It wasn't the most posh place, certainly not amongst the more luxurious buildings they owned, but it was their first and Nigel didn't have it in him to relocate. And, like him, Darko preferred to do business at their most disreputable establishment. It helped them retain a certain image they worked so hard at cultivating.*

*"Did you think on my proposal any further," Darko asked after he grew too impatient for Nigel to bring it up on his own. As Nigel knew he would.*

*"I did."*

*"And?"*

*“I told you, we don't need to make any further expansions in that particular department.”*

*Darko scoffed, shaking his head as he tried to contain his growing frustration. “Trying a new recipe, new suppliers, doesn't hurt now and then. Keeps competition away.”*

*“Why mess with a classic, when it works? Ever hear the phrase, 'If it ain't broke, don't fucking fix it?'”*

*“Did you even try the new stuff I left you?”*

*Nigel laughed and tossed his cigarette into the ashtray he kept at all times now by the window, not bothering to put it out, letting it burn out on its own. “The best in the business don't try their own product. That's what all the little worker ants are for. And they don't seem that impressed.”*

*Darko stood and adjusted his tie as he came to stand before him. There was a tightness to his smile that made Nigel's own mirth grow to see. “Well then, you're not listening to the right bugs. This shipment is a solid investment.”*

*Nigel sidestepped him to grab some things from his desk. He wasn't in the mood to be questioned. “That may be the case, but that's new business. It's September. We don't discuss new business—”*

*“'Until after the new year.' Yes, I know.”*

*Nigel paused in straightening papers and files to give Darko his full attention. “Do you have a fucking problem with the way I conduct our business, Darko?”*

*Darko wasn't looking to fight, not really. Without any further fuss he backed down, charming smile defusing a situation that could have got ugly. An occurrence that wasn't that uncommon for them. It was what made them good partners over the years. “Take it easy, you know that's not what I'm saying. Relax. Jesus, maybe this vacation is just what you need to unwind a bit.”*

*Nigel scoffed. “Right. Whisked away on a dream get-away to fucking Lithuania.”*

*“Why even go? It's making you more of a pain in the ass than usual.”*

*“Gabi wants to. Take a break from all this. Connect with family, since there's no one on her side worth a damn. And what my angel wants, she gets.”*

*Darko was the only person who knew how much of a sore subject his home country was. Why he fucking hated it and never looked back after leaving. Well, mostly why, and he was quick to change the subject. “How is Gabi? I think I've seen Katinka more in the last few months than I've seen her.”*

*Nigel felt whatever tension coiling him tight from their conversation leave him at the mention of her. Any time he said her name. That's all it ever took. He smiled and couldn't help adjusting the photos on his desk. One of his adorable daughter. One of his beautiful wife. “She's good. Tired.”*

*“I bet. I'm sure she's itching to get back to playing, get her chair back at the symphony.”*

*Nigel shrugged, closing his briefcase with a resounding click of the latches locking. “She doesn't need a symphony to play.” She was better than any of the failed musicians who took up the rest of the roster, unable to cut it anywhere else. Gabi didn't need them to sound phenomenal and they, more often than not, dragged her down. Held her back.*

*“Still, I'd go crazy not leaving the house, going out. Even if it was just to go to a damn job.”*

*“She hasn't been on leave that long. Katinka's only four months old.” If it was up to him, Gabi would never have to stray too far from the safety and comforts of their home. Her and Katinka, both.*

*As if hearing his thoughts, Darko stepped closer. He took the documents set aside for him to go over while Nigel would be gone but he didn't step away. “There a reason you're still putting Gabi on lock-down?”*

*“She's not a fucking prisoner.” Nigel snorted at the idea, at the notion that Gabi would let him even try such a thing. Still, he knew what Darko was getting at and couldn't help the reflexive climb of defensive anger. “Any reasons I had were dealt with. Don't worry about it.”*

*“If there's something going on, I need to know. No more surprises—”*

*“I fucking dealt with it.”*

*Darko smiled and patted him on the back. “You are very thorough. That wasn't any different, I suppose.”*

*It was a world of fucking difference, but he saw Darko's point. What Nigel got up to wasn't personal for him. All he knew was there were problems and Nigel took care of it. It was just business for Darko. A small, insignificant hiccup that was removed for once more smooth sailing. That was all he needed to know. The less details Darko had of Nigel's personal affairs, the better.*

*That amount of secrecy hadn't always been the case. There was a time when Nigel told Darko everything. Almost everything. He was like a brother to him. A brother Nigel could actually stand being around, anyway.*

*Nigel grabbed his briefcase and coat, sliding his sunglasses into place. Before he stepped through the door, he turned back to Darko. “Speaking of surprises, don't fucking leave that wonder dust shit at my house any more.”*

*Far from being cowed, Darko only smirked and made himself comfortable at Nigel's desk. “You've never minded me leaving samples for you before.”*

*“Not at my fucking house. Gabi could have found it first, and then I'd never hear the fucking end of it. Katinka plays in my office, asshole.”*

*Darko laughed, flipping through the papers. “She's not even half a year old. Can she even crawl yet?” When Nigel didn't respond, Darko nodded his understanding though he didn't*

*lose his mocking tone. "All right. No more samples of new drugs left for you at your house. I'll leave them here. Where cops could raid us at any time. That sounds like such a better plan."*

*Nigel took a deep breath. It didn't help to quell his irritation. Without another word, he turned to make his way downstairs and through the empty club. Darko's unenthusiastic farewell and well-wishes for a safe trip followed him out onto the street.*

*Things were off between him and his business partner. Had been for a long time. Too long, really. Nigel would have to be a moron not to notice. He wouldn't be good at what he did, have such a long reign at the top of the food chain, if he couldn't read people as well as he did. It was hard to tell if Darko was being pissy for his usual bullshit reasons, or if it was something else. Something new.*

*He supposed time would tell, and he didn't have enough of it at the moment to waste thinking about Darko. When he got back. When things got settled, he'd have a nice sit-down with Darko and clear the fucking air. At the moment, he had bags to pack and a train to board. And he didn't have any more fucking time.*

* * * * *

Though his office was thirty minutes away from home, the drive took over an hour. Fucking mid-day traffic. However, it was a pleasant reprieve and an opportunity to order his thoughts, mentally go over the many to-do lists he had. For this little family vacation and otherwise. The day was bright and breezy, one of the last beautiful summer days before autumn officially came. Good music drifted from the stereo. No business or bullshit to damage the calm he gathered within himself.

That calm immediately shriveled up and crumbled away when he returned home and found not only the front entrance unlocked, but the alarms disarmed. The first four floors of their immaculate apartment building were empty. Anyone could have just waltzed right the fuck in. Nigel's irritation only grew as each floor he cleared was passed without any of the security codes activated, no prompt for keys or passwords. What was the fucking point of all this if it was just going to be ignored?

Their front door, the one to the actual penthouse, was unlocked like the rest. He would have made his displeasure more than heard if he wasn't met in the living room with the sight of Elena putting on her jacket, ready to leave for the day. She winced as he walked up to her, knowing already what was going to come out of his mouth.

"Good afternoon, Elena." His smile often left people on-edge and this occasion wasn't any different. He did try to appear softer, not at all angry like he was, for her benefit. "Is there a reason every door I encountered—including the entrance—was unlocked?"

"Mrs. Ibanescu insisted. She said it was a hassle bothering with keys and typing in codes every time she left."

"Been in and out a lot today, has she?"

Elena shrugged, fidgeting with the strap of her bag. The extra questioning spiked her ever-present anxiety. “Maybe? I don't really know. I've been throughout the floors all day. I'm sorry.” She didn't even know what she was apologizing for, though she was sincere.

Nigel sighed and let it go. It wouldn't do any good bitching at Elena. She was just following orders. “No matter. I'm glad I caught you.” He reached into his inside breast pocket of his jacket and handed her a slip of paper. “I was just going to leave it on the counter for when you next came over, but...”

Elena balked at the check he gave her, at the amount written on it. She shook her head and tried to pass it back to him. “You already paid me this week, Mr. Lecter.”

“I know. We'll be gone for who knows how long. Consider it a bonus, for coming by every few days to tend house.”

With a timid little smile, Elena accepted the extra pay and he showed her out. She was a good kid. Nigel could trust her not to burn the place down or pawn his shit while away. Or snoop where she shouldn't. It was hard finding people he could trust and Nigel took care of his own. And with his loyal staff squared away, that left one less thing for him to worry about.

In the quiet of her departure, Nigel could just hear the faint notes of a cello. As he wandered down the hall, closer to the music, the accompaniment of a piano drifted to him. The recording was a few years old. Around when they first met. Rachmaninoff. His wife had a soft spot for the composer. Nigel came to stand in the doorway of their bedroom, watching Gabi decide which blouse to pack or leave while an old recording of herself played softly.

He wondered if she was thinking a lot about the past lately, too.

It didn't take her long to notice him, always seeming to sense when he was around. She smiled and he came to her. What else could he do? He cupped her face. Careful in a way he rarely was. Gentle, always gentle. Except for the times when she didn't want him to be. Her lips were soft and sweet. Dark and sultry perfume filled his lungs.

One of the reasons for the apparent in and out wanderings of the day became immediately clear. Gabi's hair, grown long enough to brush her shoulders in the time of pregnancy and convalescence since the birth of their daughter, was once more cut short. The sharp lines of the pixie style seemed far more severe dyed red. Refreshed and gleaming ruby red. Blood red. It made the blue of her eyes glacial. He couldn't stop himself from running his fingers through the soft strands, giving a light tug to the hair curled around her ear. Gabi pressed closer for one blissful moment, smiling against his lips, before she slipped free of his hold.

“Hello, gorgeous.” His hands had a mind of their own, always did, and they found their way to resting at her waist when she returned to packing. She hummed a small greeting and Nigel took it as an invitation to step close once more, burying his face in her vibrant hair. “How was your day?” He kissed the question into her temple.

“Same old: feed the baby, change the baby, sing the baby to sleep. Second verse, same as the first.” Gabi looked between two camisoles before tossing one on a small pile on the bed and folding the other for her suitcase.

“Darling,” Nigel kissed down her neck and across her shoulder, “Is there a reason for your constant disregard for our security system?”

Gabi tensed but she didn't pull away, mainly because she was still folding a few things. Her tone was calm and even, immediately putting Nigel on alert. “It's a hassle. It's already annoying going down so many floors to get outside, I don't want to bother with locking doors over and over.” She did break free of his hold then to go into their closet to start throwing jewelry into a smaller bag.

“I know, but it's for your own good. For everyone's safety.” And he knew he worded that wrong as soon as he said it.

“I'm not living in a fucking cage, Nigel!”

“It's not to cage you. It's just a precaution. For all of us. While things are a little heated.” His soft reassurances did nothing to placate Gabi.

“And who's fucking fault is that?”

Something in the way she asked him, the look in her eyes. It brought Nigel up short, surprised. He almost asked her what she knew. He caught himself at the last second, making himself sound calm and unbothered by the accusation in her voice. “I'm not sure what you mean, darling. The city has always been a rowdy place, more so lately. I just want us to be safe. You and Katinka.” Nothing mattered more than their safety.

Gabi scoffed and shook her head, brushing by him to grab a few things off her vanity. “I'm sure you do. Protecting me by keeping me locked away for some stupid shit you and Darko stirred up.”

Gabi's fire, her passionate attitude—it almost distracted him. Nigel loved when she got riled, mouthy. Cursing his existence as equally as she kissed him breathless. He came to her once again, swallowing up whatever else she was going to yell at him in a kiss. Whispered apologies, promises of making it up to her, vows of her future happiness all spoken between teasing kisses. It calmed her down, somewhat. But his touches never erased the tension shivering through her. Not completely.

Gabi sighed against his mouth, hands combing gently through his hair now instead of pulling, before she walked away. “I don't want to fight about this again, Nigel. Let's just...Let's focus on the next coming days, okay?”

Nigel wanted to fight. He wanted to lay everything out in the open. Once and for all. But now was not the time. Soon. He smiled in acquiescence to Gabi's wishes before double-checking his own luggage, all packed and ready. When he returned, he found Gabi where he left her—still agonizing over what clothes to pair with what shoes and whatever-the-fuck else. When he mentioned going to grab Katinka's things, Nigel walked right into another minefield.

“There's nothing to grab. I didn't have time to pack for her, yet.” Gabi threw aside a jacket to snatch up another. “I haven't had time to do anything, Nigel! I've been taking care of Katinka all day.”

“Is something wrong?” Their daughter was usually pretty easy to care for. Thoughts of colds and ear infections immediately spiked his growing anxiety. Just as quickly, they were extinguished.

“No, nothing major. You know how it is. Or you would, if you helped me out once in a while.”

Anxiety tipped quickly into anger and Nigel left the room before he added fuel to the fire Gabi wanted to ignite. That was not fucking fair. He looked after Katinka plenty. Often, she came with him to his goddamn office because Gabi had a migraine, lingering nausea or was too exhausted to see to Katinka. Which, fine. Nigel didn't give birth to their baby. He didn't carry her for nine months. Gabi deserved some time to herself, to relax. Whatever she wanted, he would happily give her.

However, right now Gabi was looking to needle him and he didn't have the fucking time nor energy to oblige his angel.

He came into the nursery, dark aside from the light from the windows. Katinka settled against his shoulder without much fuss and it was the first time that day he felt like he could fucking breathe. She snuffled and yawned, tiny fingers gripping tight the material of his sleeve.

“Hello, my love. Have you been good for Mama?”

She only cooed and gurgled, which he took for an affirmation. It wasn't time for a bottle and she didn't need to be changed. Nigel buried his face against her neck, inhaling the soft sweetness of her scent. He honestly didn't know what Gabi was bitching about. If Nigel could stay hidden away from the world with their baby instead of stepping foot outside, he would in a heartbeat. He'd never leave this sanctuary again.

Fuck business. Fuck Darko. Fuck the world.

He'd look through Katinka's clothes in a little while. Her toys and bottles and pacifiers and formula would all get packed away with his usual precision and organization. For now, he spent the precious idle minutes with his daughter in the quiet of the late afternoon.

Nigel bounced Katinka gently as he wandered to the window to look out at the city from the fifth floor of his impenetrable fortress. He watched as traffic grew and more and more people filled the busy streets, Gabi taking her sweet time all the while. He wasn't worried. He knew she wouldn't make them late. It was all a show.

Everything they did these days was a performance.

Gabi had her own schedule to adhere to. She fought him just enough to be convincing. This was all her idea, after all. If Gabi suddenly became docile and cooperative he would know something was up. A shame for her, that he already did.

Nigel knew, shortly after Gabi started pulling away from him. He knew it wasn't just being pregnant that made his beautiful wife standoffish. He knew when their bank account barely saw any use—other than auto-paid bills—that she was starting to use her separate, personal,

checking account more. He knew when she suddenly started asking after his family that she was planning something big.

Nigel knew Gabi was seeing Charlie Countryman again.

Chapter End Notes

A few things:

It looks like the travel hours are a bit off, but I'm pretty sure I got the numbers right when writing Mr. Lecter. I think it's changed now, with the whole Russia-starting-a-war-thing and all that gave me new, longer travel times. I just kept them as is.

Brace yourselves, dear readers. As this is an AU of an AU, all bets are off. The first story worked in the confines of being somewhat of an adaptation of Mrs. Winterbourne. The second installment was still a part of that, thus it had to stay within those perimeters. This, on the other hand, has no such boundaries. This is unleashed and allowed to wander where it will. A wild story. So far, it's writing completely different. I hope you all enjoy what's coming.

# Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

I like this chapter. Part of why I enjoy revisiting this story (for the third time!) is because of all the potential it had. So many things were happening at once. So many stories told at the same time. So many places it could have went. Now, we get to see what was happening on Nigel's side. I hope the small bits of rehashed dialogue aren't boring. I tried to make up for it by all the new things from Nigel's inner-workings and observations.

Real quick before I end the note, I want to thank JaimeeAllOver, Mrs_SiriusBlack, Teallama666, EmilyElm, Katzensprung and Barranca for taking the time to leave such kind comments. Honestly, I wasn't expecting to hear from too many people. It was lovely and encouraging to see people still enjoy and are interested in this series. :D

Please enjoy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Chapter Two**

They made it to the station, onto the train, with just a few minutes to spare before departure.

Nigel loved Bucharest but, goddamn, were tourists and mindless club-hoppers fucking annoying when he had somewhere to be and couldn't get through the congestion they created at every fucking crosswalk. They had a cabin rented for the mind-numbing trip that would take nearly four days. However, neither he nor Gabi felt like dragging their bags all around the damn train and decided to just shove everything in the overhead and sit in their designated car, for the time being. To his great surprise, after all that fretting, Gabi only had one piece of luggage. Aside from her purse and Katinka's diaper bag.

Gabi carried them to their seats while Nigel stuck close to her side, cradling Katinka against his shoulder. They were thrown together with only one other passenger, it seemed. Thank Christ. Nigel didn't know if he could have handled being surrounded by tourists and whoever else found themselves on a late-night train to Lithuania for so long.

Gabi asked if the seats surrounding the passenger were taken. When her question was met with empty silence, Nigel peered over her shoulder to see who they had to deal with and prayed it wasn't some fucking junkie. They were looking down at their lap, lost in the pages of a giant fucking tome that balanced there. All Nigel could make out was the top of a head full of brown curls and the rims of a pair of tortoiseshell glasses. Sensing someone nearby, the man's head jerked up. Wide, blue eyes flicked over Gabi before taking in Nigel and the baby he held.

Gabi smiled and asked, again, “Is it all right if we take these seats?”

Without missing a beat, the man gave them a small nod and said, “Of course.”

Their traveling companion understood Gabi's Romanian, it was clear, but he answered in English. That flat accent Americans all seemed to have. When he stood to make room for them, he closed his book. Nigel glanced at it and disguised his snort of laughter as a cough as he handed off Katinka to put their bags away. *Divine Comedy*. Of all fucking things. Considering where they were heading, who he was visiting, maybe it was a sign.

Or an ill omen.

Gabi settled in one of the seats across from the stranger, next to the window. She arranged Katinka on her lap, gifting him one of her genuine smiles. “You're American?” Her English was perfect, what with all the practice she had.

“Yes, ma'am, I am.”

And good manners, to boot. Nigel was almost entirely convinced this was some sign from God.

“I'm Gabi. This is Nigel.”

He nodded to Gabi and gave Nigel's hand a reluctant shake. “Aiden. Nice to meet you.”

Gabi's lovely smile grew when Katinka yawned and stretched with the effort. She tilted Katinka more towards Aiden. “And this is Katinka.”

There came the slightest smile from Aiden as he looked over the baby. “Nice to meet you too, Katinka.”

“Are you stationed here, Aiden,” Nigel asked. Running into an American in such a setting only meant a handful of things. Nigel was willing to give the man the benefit of the doubt.

Dark blue eyes glanced his way, anywhere but making full contact with Nigel's, before settling diplomatically on his cheek. Slender hands traced over the faded cover of the book in his lap. “You mean the army base? No, I'm not enlisted.”

“You don't seem antsy like the common American tourist, is all.” Nigel had the urge to poke and didn't bother trying to hold it back.

“Nigel, don't be mean,” Gabi warned him off his teasing, but her words held a bit of a playful lilt of their own.

Nigel's smile grew as he caught her little smirk. “I'm only saying, Aiden here is not the usual jittery tourist that gets their wallet stolen minutes after wandering away from the airport.” He couldn't help winking at her and captured her hand to kiss.

A soft scoff of a laugh escaped Aiden and he nodded. “Fair point. No, I'm not in the army, or a tourist. I'm a professor at one of the small colleges in Bucharest. Psychology,” he offered

freely.

“That sounds exciting,” Gabi said as she switched Katinka over to rest against her other arm.

An odd sensation, one that Nigel refused to call a chill, ran down his spine. He didn't believe in fate, but there was something going on. There was something about Aiden. He gave nothing of his feelings away as he said, “I was just going to say how terribly dull that sounded.”

Aiden smiled and finally met Nigel's stare. He wasn't offended by Nigel's teasing. It wasn't a common occurrence when Nigel displayed his special brand of charm in front of the prim and proper. His brother could attest. And yet, Aiden seemed as equally amused as Nigel. Sitting across from him, in tan slacks and a little fucking argyle sweater. A goddamn curl fell into his eye over his glasses. A wee thing, dressed for church with his nonna. Calm and uncowed and so very amused with Nigel's rough edges.

It was a familiar kind of attention that Nigel hadn't felt the focus of in almost thirty years.

“And what is it that you two do,” Aiden asked, keeping up the game of pleasantries.

“Gabi's a cellist for the orchestra.” Nigel was always more than happy to brag about his wife.

“*Was*.” Gabi's smile faltered at the reminder but then returned with blinding brilliance as she focused on Katinka sleeping in her lap. “I'm—how do you say? I'm having maternal time away.”

Nigel hated that it hurt her to think of her music with sadness. It wasn't forever. Once Gabi was rested and ready, she'd have her place back. Once this was all over, she'd be happy again. “She's an angel on the strings. I bet they're fucking dying while you've been gone. Did you ever go to the symphony, Aiden?”

“Once or twice.”

“Well, then you might've heard our Gabi. Small world.”

“It is, indeed. What do you do, Nigel?”

“I'm a business man. I own several nightclubs throughout the city. I lease out venues for performances, as well. Sometimes, Gabi and I cross paths professionally.”

“Now, I know why I sound boring to you.”

The statement was dry and straightforward and made Nigel laugh. This fucking kid. At the sound, Aiden focused once more on him. His eyes landed on the tattoo on Nigel's neck. His small smile grew as Gabi hushed Nigel, putting her hand on his knee.

“He's teasing. Don't take what he says serious, Aiden.”

Aiden shrugged to show no harm was done. He seemed too tired to get worked up, even if he wanted to be. Nigel could relate. He checked his watch and cursed under his breath at the

time. Nowhere near when he usually fell into bed, but the late hour weighed on him after all the running around of the day. It was no wonder that Katinka had yet to do more than yawn at them and nap through conversation and commotion from the train alike.

With a sigh, Nigel waved an attendant over to order them all a drink. It wasn't the best wine they'd ever had but it would do. Gabi wasn't nursing and took the glass of deep red Cabernet with a grateful smile.

Aiden leaned in his seat to grab the wallet from his back pocket and Nigel shook his head. “Your money's no good to me, Aiden. My treat. I insist.”

Nigel had a feeling that, ordinarily, Aiden would refuse the offer. He only paused for the slightest moment before he put his wallet away with another small nod. “Thank you.”

Aiden sipped his whiskey as Nigel did the same. Not the best, but not the worst. In that moment, he would have drank paint thinner if it helped him prepare for where he was going.

“You live and work in Romania, but are going to Lithuania. Is it for your job you travel so far?” Gabi sipped her wine and rocked Katinka in her travel bassinet that she had set up in the seat across from her.

Aiden had settled as much as he could against his seat and absently watched as the baby dozed beside him. “No. I had some vacation time I needed to use. A quick getaway seemed like a good idea.”

Nigel snorted and threw back half his drink in one gulp. The burn of the alcohol down his throat a blissful distraction from his thoughts. “You chose fucking *Lithuania* for your vacation? Anyone ever tell you, you have an odd sense of taste, Aiden?”

“Actually, yes. Not those exact words, though.”

“I bet.” Nigel snickered at the absurdity of it, amused even further by the way Aiden pushed his glasses up, all prissy and uptight, only to have them slide right back down.

Aiden toyed with his glass and looked between Nigel and Gabi. “I'm guessing you're traveling to Lithuania not because of a 'want,' but for a 'need.'”

Gabi's smile might fool their companion but not Nigel. She took a long pull of her wine before she said, “We are going to see Nigel's family.”

“First time?” Perhaps, Aiden was more astute than Nigel gave him credit.

“Yes. Even when we were dating, and then married, we never seemed to have the time to have them visit, or go to them.” Gabi gave a little shake in her seat, giggling in exasperation at herself. “I am very nervous.”

Nigel was quick to soothe any doubts she may have had, may have tried to hide from him, and shook his head. He couldn't resist giving a gentle tug to her hair. “There's no need to feel nervous. None. My family are a bunch of stuffy assholes. You don't need to impress anybody, darling.”

Delicate fingers, still calloused from the strings she strummed so masterfully, wrapped around his wrist. He thought she was going to pull free, but Gabi smiled and kissed his palm. “They are your family. It is important.”

“They're fucking mental. Don't stress over them.” How did she not know? She was worth more to him than anything his family could hope to be. They weren't worth the dust on her boots, let alone her concern. Silky strands of ruby red wound around his finger and he could feel his regard for her begin to grow and thrash into something far too intense for random on-lookers to witness. To lighten the mood, but only slightly joking, Nigel motioned at the man across from them. “We should bring our new frumpy little American with us. He's a psychologist. Maybe he can do something about them.”

That surprised a laugh out of Aiden and he shook his head. “I'm not a practicing psychologist. My background is actually in forensic psychology and behavioral science.”

Moment broken between them, Nigel and Gabi focused once more on Aiden. What exactly came from Aiden's mouth finally filtered through and Nigel frowned. “I don't know what any of what you just said means.” Nigel stood before the wee man could attempt to explain, taking their empty glasses with him.

They were nowhere near being out of Romania. Lithuania was still days away. He needed another drink.

* * * * *

The whiskey helped.

It didn't change the fact that they made it into Belarus and he was the closest to Lithuania he had been in years. Cheap booze didn't suddenly make Gabi once more genuine in her enjoyment of his company. But it softened the ache her brittle smiles caused in his chest. It steadied the tremor in his hands and the constant jiggle of his knee whenever an announcement was made overhead of their current location and stop.

The car swayed gently beneath them as it picked up speed from the last station. Nothing could be seen out of the window aside from the growing dark of the evening. From the doorway of the car, a figure separated from the shadows. Light tread against rough carpet. A frumpy, fluffy outline slowly transformed into a person. Not Gabi. Aiden back from the loo, or wherever else he'd disappeared to a limited space like a moving train provided.

Into the silence, Nigel couldn't help saying with a tired smirk and a nod to the passing countryside, “Thought you might have reconsidered your vacation spot and jumped to freedom.”

Aiden smiled as he flopped down into his seat, arranging himself into as comfortable position he could manage while pulling off his sweater to shove under his head. White t-shirt wrinkled beneath but ignored for the sake of a little more cushioning against hard benches. He stifled a yawn as he looked Nigel over. “Projection is often a tool we use as a defense mechanism.”

Said with a small smirk, tired eyes watching for his response without the line of his frames hiding the humor within and Nigel wondered if Aiden even needed them. Perhaps, a defense mechanism of his own. Nigel scoffed and shook his head. “Are you always such a cheeky little fuck, or did I just catch you at a good time?”

“There's a reason I don't like to teach morning classes, and that my students hate when I do.” Some of the humor softened in his eyes, his tone, when he asked, “You *really* don't want to go back, do you?”

Just the thought of it had Nigel's hands curling into tight fists against his thighs. Aiden cataloged the movement, taking in his discomfort and tension. But he didn't retract his question. Curiosity was still brimming from his gaze. It was, again, a familiar feeling. Comforting in a way, to know Aiden was merely interested for interest's sake. He wanted to know what made him tick, but not necessarily to use that information against him. Nigel blamed that sense of familiarity, and the knowledge that Aiden was a stranger passing briefly through his life, that made him indulgent of the man.

“Not really.” That wasn't going to be enough to satisfy his curiosity and he gave Nigel a *look* to goad him further. Nigel sighed and pressed his head harder against his seat. A headache was trying to creep up on him. He needed more whiskey. “It's not rocket science, Aiden. Lithuania is a shithole. Filled to fucking bursting with people and places I would rather never see again.”

“Bad memories.”

It wasn't a question. Nigel answered anyway. “You have no idea, wee man.”

“And you're going back just because of your baby?”

Nigel shrugged at Aiden's genuine confusion of the situation. Still overthinking. Still not understanding how simple it all was. “My beautiful Gabriela thinks it'll be good for us, for Katinka. Maybe it will. We'll see.” He caught himself before he could let slip anything else. This fucking kid. He just had one of those faces, Nigel supposed. Made a man feel like he could spill all his secrets. Nigel wanted to bristle at that, honestly, but, again, Aiden had a way about him. That didn't stop Nigel from wanting a little payback. Turn the tables a bit. “Do you have any kids, Aiden? Wife? Girlfriend? Boyfriend? A guy who wears argyle can't be single.”

And maybe the feeling of uninhibited divulgence was mutual because Aiden only laughed. “Shut up. No. No girl or boy in my life.” A hesitant sort of happiness teased at the slight curve of his lips. “I do have a kid. On the way, anyway. The mom and I aren't together. She's not even in the same country.”

It was something not many people knew. Nigel had a feeling. A rare gem from someone as secretive as Nigel, perhaps more so. And, like always, Nigel found himself wanting to press for more once given an inch. “Knock up an ex?”

“It wasn't like that. My friend prefers women, but she wanted a baby. She wanted a baby with me, actually. So, I said yes. She bought us some insanely expensive whiskey. We finished the

bottle. Afterwards, she was pregnant."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

That wasn't quite the story Nigel expected. It was rather impressive coming from his current traveling companion. Aiden had spunk, he'd give him that. "Huh."

Another grainy announcement interrupted their quiet conversation. It would be several hours before the next stop. Many more beyond that before they got to Lithuania. All the same, they were on schedule. The thought of being on the train for so long made Nigel want to scream. He closed his eyes and reached for any kind of calm he may have still possessed. The only thing he found was bored exhaustion and the tickling beginnings of a craving for a cigarette.

"Did you recently quit?"

Aiden's question made him realize he must have said something out loud. Nigel cracked his eyes open and he appreciated that Aiden didn't wilt at the glare he was given. "Who said anything about quitting?"

Aiden flicked his gaze to the empty seat beside Nigel and the abandoned bassinet before saying, "You could smoke now, if Gabi and Katinka are what's stopping you." He waved his hand in the universal sign for *don't mind me*.

"If only that was just the case." He gave a slight shrug, spreading his hands flat against his thighs to still their fidgety tapping. "Left my last pack behind in Bucharest somewhere." The office or the apartment, he couldn't say with all the rushing around. "Just as well. Gabi'll bitch all the way to Vilnius, if I light up right now."

"She's the recent quitter, then." They both smiled at Aiden's guess that wasn't really one.

"At least I know Gabi and my brother'll get along great. The fucker hated whenever I smoked too. She didn't always hate it. Gave it up when she knew we were pregnant. Gave up a few habits for the baby." Some far easier than others. Some she picked right back up when she thought Nigel wasn't looking.

Sensing a dark undercurrent to his words, Aiden smartly chose to steer clear of a potential incident. Instead of continuing on in that vein, he stepped right onto another verbal landmine when he asked, "You have a brother?"

"Brother and sister both. I left them behind with all the other bullshit in Lithuania. They probably still live with my uncle at his fucking depressing house. Neither of them ever seemed willing to cut the cord and leave the nest." Nigel smiled at Aiden's calm, curious silence. Nothing he said, and didn't say, fazed him in the slightest. "You don't seem like a bleeding heart, worrying over my tragic family ties."

"Family is what we make of it. And sometimes, the people we are born knowing aren't worth keeping around. And those who are, are worth doing anything to keep."

“Sounds like you're very familiar with the concept.”

“I am, so who am I to question or judge? And if you're now leaving more 'bullshit' behind in Romania, I'd say sometimes it helps to go back to the roots to chop away the spreading problems.” Aiden smiled, a slow and easy thing. “I left a fair amount of bullshit, myself, behind in the states. And sooner rather than later, I am going to go back and chop away my own problematic roots.”

It resonated in Nigel down deep, the things this little American spoke softly between them. Things Nigel was contemplating. The thoughts he was entertaining. Aiden was far more astute than what Nigel first gave him credit for. Perhaps, it all really was a sign. An omen. Nigel laughed and nodded in agreement. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his family returning.

Nigel let their conversation die, but not without first saying, “I had a feeling you would understand.”

* * * * *

Thirty-five hours into the trip and Nigel couldn't say he was relaxed or happy, but the alcohol did its job of dulling all the sharp and deadly things rattling around in his head. There was a certain comfort in the finality of it all, he was surprised to find. Though he hadn't yet reached his destination, he was at the end of the road. There was nowhere left to run except right back to the beginning. No amount of bargaining or buying off could change that now. It was close.

Homecoming.

Warmth at his shoulder brought Nigel back from wandering the dark and twisted paths of his memory lane. Gentle, nimble fingers played at his hair and he turned to find Gabi watching him. They were tired, but they both refused to retire to their cabin. Nigel used the excuse of not wanting to move Katinka, disturb her blessedly deep and easy sleep. He couldn't say what Gabi's was. The rented space was used as a place to change clothes and diapers more than anything else.

Gabi smiled, teasing his hair as it fell messily into his eyes and took his sunglasses from the perch atop his head to fix the tangles. She was so beautiful. Her smile and laughter only for him in this quiet moment where everyone else was either gone or sleeping. Even Aiden was out cold across from them.

Just them. Alone against the world, their daughter safe and asleep between them. Before Nigel could ask after her, offer her anything and everything in his power to give, Gabi pulled him close and kissed the words into silence. The perfume she favored, notes of pomegranate and smoke, was a faded phantom after so long ago applied to tender pulse points but it still made Nigel's head spin. Or perhaps, that was just Gabi.

Too brief a touch, Gabi pulled back after only a moment of contact. Nigel knew better than to press for more. It was a game. One they played for the better half of a year now. This was new, though. This sudden sweetness. Nigel didn't fool himself into thinking it was anything more than keeping up appearances.

It astounded and amused him, this sudden care Gabi had for their public appearance. So different from just a day ago. Nigel didn't really understand her need to play happy families in front of strangers, but he'd go along with it. Practice, perhaps. A rehearsal before the big show at his family's estate.

Gloomy thoughts came to a halt as the train gave a slight lurch as it began to slow. A voice overhead announced a stop in Druskininkai. The droning voice repeated the message in Romanian, Ukrainian and on and on but Nigel stopped listening after the first time spoken in Lithuanian.

They finally made it over the border into Lithuania. Only a handful of hours left, before the Great Fucking Reunion. Nigel exhaled slowly, letting his head fall against the hard fabric of the seat. He wished it was a wall to bash his head on. He fucking hated Lithuania. And to make matters worse, he left behind his fucking cigarettes in all the goddamn excitement. No reprieve from all the bullshit that he usually found in nicotine. He could feel his nerves tightening, coiling. Winding him up so tight that the impending explosion promised to be a glorious and violent thing.

The train finally stopped with a gentle screech of brakes as they coasted into the picturesque station.

It was then that Nigel took notice of his surroundings, something other than his beautiful Gabi and slowly waking baby. Their new frumpy friend seemed to have the jitters, as well. Even as the meeting with his long-abandoned family hung over him, Nigel still felt amusement bubbling up inside him as he watched Aiden gaze out the window.

He reminded Nigel of a small woodland creature. Fluffy and twitchy and needing to run a mile or two to expel all that nervous energy. Nigel could fucking relate. Suddenly, Aiden stood and shoved his ghastly sweater back on over his rumpled t-shirt. He grabbed his bag, book under his arm and glasses balanced on the tip of his nose in a slight skew.

“I need to get off for a little bit,” he mumbled to them before scurrying down the aisle.

Not that they were about to question him. Still, Nigel gave him a lazy wave in response. He watched Aiden until he disappeared from sight, frowning when he realized he was jealous of the man's escape. A few minutes off the train, to stretch his legs and maybe find a cigarette or twenty, sounded fucking outstanding. Only a few more seconds ticked by before Nigel made a decision.

“Where are you going,” Gabi asked when he stood.

“I need to find some cigarettes.” It was a sore subject between them, as Gabi had given up smoking completely but Nigel was never able to kick the habit. There was something in her eyes, a twist to plump and pouting lips, that made Nigel desperate to distract her. He took up her hand and kissed it, promising, “I'll be back long before the train pulls out, and I'll see to Katinka when I do. Give you a break.”

She wanted to argue, say something more. In a change of pace, she swallowed whatever barb sat on her sweet tongue. Gabi smiled instead. “Go on, then.”

“Two seconds, gorgeous.” Nigel kissed her hand again but didn't press for more, knowing Gabi would only freeze up without an audience, before turning to make a quick escape out of the compartment.

Nigel shivered as soon as he stepped out of the train and off the platform. A gust of cold wind blew through the station. The smell of rain was on the air. He cursed for not thinking to bring his jacket but didn't want to take the time to go back and dig it out of his bag. When they left their home in Bucharest, he wore sunglasses to shield his eyes from the balmy, bright sun. Now, the thin material of his silk shirt did nothing to keep the chill at bay.

Fucking Lithuania.

He wandered the station, dodging passers-by as he searched for a little shop or vending machine. Absently, he noticed Aiden at one of the small tables. He had his laptop out and whatever he was up to caused a little crease to form between his eyes as he scowled at the screen. He shut the computer and packed it away, heading for the restrooms just as Nigel finally set eyes on a vending machine that contained several different packs of cigarettes.

Of which none were his preferred brand. Nigel settled for a pack of Marlboro Reds. The first hit of nicotine made him not care. It would do. He stood for a minute more, or two, watching the crowd. His brother would probably appreciate a phone call, an update on where they were. He could always text his sister, instead. Nigel did neither, forestalling the inevitable even now. A scoff escaped him as he tossed his filter into a nearby bin. All the miles he put between him and the past and he really hadn't fucking changed at all.

Before making his way back to the train, he decided to use one of the restrooms in the station. Thirty-five hours under his belt, just a handful more left, and he didn't fancy the idea of squeezing himself into the tiny loo on the train. As he approached the restroom, the noises coming from within didn't register in his distracted mind. The snatches of yelling in a language very much not Lithuanian barely caught his attention. He pushed in the door and froze in his steps towards what he expected to be a vacant urinal or stall.

Crimson on white tile caught and held his attention. A growing pool of red, nearly black. Blood spread across the floor, spilling from a gaping tear in some stranger's neck. The three-inch switchblade responsible for the mess lay nearby the man, forgotten and dripping. The nameless nobody lay sprawled on the floor, dead and growing cold before Nigel's apathetic gaze. A clatter of metal shifted his growing curiosity, broke his stare. A gun was ripped from another stranger's grip. It skidded against the floor to bump against Nigel's boot. He stooped to pick it up, automatically checking the rounds and resting his finger on the safety.

All the while, his focus never left the commotion happening before him. He couldn't have walked away, even if he wanted to. The incompetent gunman didn't have a chance to rectify his mistake. Aiden—frumpy little Aiden—twisted the man's arm up behind him when he tried to throw a punch. Coasting with the momentum of the deflection, Aiden grabbed a handful of the man's hair and bashed his head into the corner of the sink.

Again and again. A piece of the counter broke off after the fifth hit. In the end, the man's head was nothing more than shreds of meat and shards of bone. Nigel could make out brain matter amongst clumps of hair. But what really stole his attention, captured his gaze, was

Aiden. Winded and bruised but standing. Calm as you please. Blood-spray soaked his sweater, slicked his hands, speckled his glasses. But Aiden wasn't bothered by any of it.

And when he turned and noticed Nigel?

Nothing. No excuses. No crying or remorse over what just happened. He only tensed the slightest bit, waiting to see what Nigel would do. A smile came unbidden to Nigel's lips. He leaned against the door, hand reaching behind him to find the lock.

Aiden just became *very* interesting.

Chapter End Notes

Nigel has been really fun to play around with. I find him a compelling character, when he could have so easily been a one-dimensional Bad Guy. I fleshed him out using inspiration from other Mads Mikkelsen characters. The character from a movie called Exit, who is a yuppie family man venture capitalist type with a sus and shady past. And the character from Prague, a neurotic workaholic dealing with old family secrets and drama, who's wife is having an affair. I think they blended amazingly with Nigel and I hope you all will think so too once the story progresses.

Playing with the first meeting with Will was fun too. When beginning this project I kept getting *Strangers on a Train* vibes. :D

Hope you all are still interested and that I didn't bore anyone to death. I'd love to hear what you think! Till next time!

# Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

Welcome back!

So, this chapter was pretty fun to write. Very different vibe from the rest of the series. But do we expect anything less from Nigel?

Real quick: I wanted to thank Unimiru, Mrs_SiriusBlack, Kai_99, HowlinMad and Katzensprung for taking the time to leave me comments last chapter. It was very kind and lovely and I really appreciate it.

Please enjoy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Chapter Three**

What was the etiquette in situations such as this? Would it be considered rude to ask questions? Was the priority disposal, before prying into the affairs of another? The dead were already strewn about, so was it more important to save small talk for the sake of helping a guy out in his time of need? Nigel's brother would know more about propriety and civility than him. As for helping, Nigel hadn't been completely decided on just what he wanted to do.

Not until Aiden looked him in the eye, the dire magnitude of the situation finally dawning on him. Still, there was no panic. No real worry over Nigel running to tell cops or whomever else was in screaming distance. He only took off his glasses to stow away in his pocket and watched, waited to see what Nigel would do, hands curling as blood dried sticky on his fingers. Uncomfortable with an inconvenient mess, not the act itself.

It really only took a matter of seconds for Nigel to decide what he was going to do. An eternity within the handful of heartbeats between them. He took a step towards the nearest body; the poor bastard with his throat cut by, more than likely, his own knife.

Nigel stepped over the body, careful to give the puddle of blood a wide berth, and pushed the door in of the stall at the far end to peer inside. Wheelchair accessible. Roomy. Plenty of space for what he had in mind. He nodded to Aiden and helpfully began directing the impromptu cover-up. The first announcement for the next boarding hadn't even sounded yet. They had a few minutes. Nigel had worked with much less before.

“Grab his arms, I'll get his legs.”

Aiden didn't so much as snap into action as he flowed into the command. He was strong, Nigel learned. For such a slight-looking kid, he hefted the body like the guys with their catch

down at the docks. Nigel's appreciation for his traveling companion only grew as, once the first body was shoved back against the toilet, Aiden stopped to check pockets and came up with a phone and wallet that were slipped unceremoniously into his slacks.

It was when they grabbed up the second body that Nigel's curiosity got the best of him. “Did you piss off some mafia boss, or something?”

Aiden looked up as he finished wrapping the man's now searched and emptied jacket around his ruined face with a puzzled scowl. “What do you mean?”

It was the first he'd spoken the entire time but Nigel didn't mind. “I heard them yelling—before you smashed that one's head into paste. That's why I never get involved with Italians. They're so fucking dramatic,” Nigel finished as they dropped the man atop the other.

“You speak Italian?”

“You don't?”

Nigel left Aiden to pout while he washed his hands. He glanced around as he straightened his shirt and righted his hair. They did a fair job cleaning up. Not one drop of blood to mar the pristine white of his shirt. No one would notice anything amiss, as long as they didn't go into the last stall. Nigel smiled, just thinking of the surprise some idiot couple had coming to them when they fell into the large stall for a quickie. He was just about to suggest they leave quietly and get back to their seats like good little tourists when a cellphone was raised into his line of sight.

“Will you tell me what this says, please?”

Sweet as pie, this blood-stained boy. Nigel sighed but took the phone, sliding his sunglasses into his shirt as he scrolled for anything meaningful. It didn't take long to find something to catch his interest.

“Huh.”

“What?” Aiden moved as if he wanted to come closer, search the screen, before he caught himself and kept still.

“Well, Aiden, it appears these two gentlemen were texting one another about you. I assume you're the mentioned '*target sighted*.'” Nigel scoffed but kept reading. So fucking dramatic. He exited the text thread and turned the screen off before handing the phone back. “They were talking with someone else, someone who obviously didn't follow you into the loo.”

“They're waiting?”

“Looks like it. Waiting for confirmation that they bagged you. These idiots never actually confirmed they saw you. Last text said they were double-checking. Lucky you.”

Finally, something like panic flashed in Aiden's eyes. “There's someone left,” he repeated the obvious as he took a few stumbling steps back. Nigel tried to grab him as he rushed by,

snagging the scratchy weave of his sleeve. He hadn't even cleaned up yet. Aiden twisted free of his hold, turning back long enough to yell, “There's someone left who knows I'm here!”

Aiden was out the door before Nigel could stop him. He hoped it was either too crowded to notice a disheveled, bloody boy running through the station or most people had left to find a cab. Or get back on the damn train. Which was exactly what Nigel needed to do. He counted to three before opening the door. A part of him felt bad for leaving Aiden alone to handle whatever the hell this all was, equally intrigued and drawn in by the blood and chaos. But Nigel couldn't do more than what he already did for him. He barely had the time and energy to deal with his own shit. He did not have the fucking luxury of getting sucked into Aiden's mess, as well.

Nigel was set on boarding and forgetting he ever saw Aiden, when a glimpse of pale pink fabric caught in his periphery and a distressed little whimper stopped him in his tracks. The sound did something to him—as always—triggered some archaic response in his hind-brain. His eyes immediately sought out the source, pinpointing the location of the pitiful sound that came from Katinka whenever she was upset. His blood froze upon finding her.

“What the fuck?”

Set on the bench right beside the bathroom doors. Perched without anyone nearby to keep her from rocking off the edge. Nigel knelt to examine Katinka, her bassinet she was swaddled inside. For a moment, he couldn't make sense of it. Why was she here? Where was Gabi? Why would she just fucking *leave* their baby unattended in an unknown place? But then he noticed the piece of paper sticking out from between Katinka's blanket and the edge of her carrier and a sickening clarity began to sink deep into his gut.

*It's too much, having someone owe you their life. I never asked for such a burden. Consider your debt paid.*

*Goodbye, Nigel.*

It wasn't signed, but he knew who the note was from. Hastily scrawled across a page torn from the little fucking notebook she always kept in her purse. Gabi's familiar, looping handwriting. As if scribbled down with seconds to spare. Like she was in a hurry and couldn't be bothered to give Nigel more than a few lines as a farewell. Nigel grabbed up Katinka's bassinet and took a few hurried steps to the platform before he stopped.

He couldn't board. Not even to grab his goddamn bags. Though, the detail that Katinka's was conveniently left beside her did finally manage to seep into his consciousness. *How fucking thoughtful.* His mind raced, rerouting and planning anew as he willed the growing panic and alarm down deep and away. They were just distractions. Ones he couldn't afford to pay any mind at the moment. With a sharp, calming breath Nigel turned and made his way to the exits.

He couldn't board. Gabi wouldn't be there. But if he was lucky, he could catch her outside.

Nigel didn't tear out of the station like he wanted, knocking people down if need be to clear the way. He kept his stride long and quick. As fast as he could manage while holding the

baby. *She knew that would slow you down*, a vicious little voice whispered to him and he refused to listen to any more of its poison. A part of him wanted to believe it wasn't too late, that Gabi was still with him. His hope died a quick and pitiful death as soon as he stepped outside.

He cursed and tucked Katinka as close as possible. Cold rain poured down as thunder rumbled overhead. Now and again a piece of sleet hit like razors against his skin. Because why the hell not? If Nigel wasn't about to have a goddamn meltdown, he might have laughed. And for such a quaint fucking station, the traffic was a bit congested. Though not so much that he was able to not see Gabi's retreating form in the people passing by or in the cars that pulled away.

Shaking soaked hair from his eyes and putting his useless sunglasses away, Nigel scanned the area a few seconds more. Nothing. No shapely figure he would recognize even if he were blind. No shock of red against the dismal gray of the day. There wasn't even a car driving suspiciously fast out of the pick-up zone. Not a goddamn clue as to where his wife went. He took another breath and had to swallow back the urge to scream. It was astounding how beautifully she fucking played him.

Like one of her goddamn cellos.

Katinka whimpered, growing colder and more miserable by the second. Nigel made a decision. He turned and headed for the secluded parking lot at the back of the station, avoiding people and staff and cameras as he went. Rentals and cars left by travelers would be kept there. It would be at least a few hours, a few days if he began to have some luck, before anyone noticed a missing vehicle from the lot.

Any plans Nigel had of stealing a car evaporated as the sound of a struggle reached him. For the second time that day.

Weaving though aisles of cars brought Nigel to a scene that he found oddly amusing. Aiden hadn't made it very far, he saw, but did manage to find the person at the end of the text chain who had given him so much trouble. Nigel came at the right moment to witness Aiden smash yet another man's head in. This time, against the trunk of a car. Nigel glanced down at Katinka. She wasn't nearly as soaked as he was, but that wouldn't be the case for much longer. He didn't fancy the thought of her developing a cold from being in such shit weather. Nigel sighed and came closer to the fight.

He found a ride.

While Aiden was otherwise preoccupied, Nigel checked the car to see if Katinka could be settled in the back without much fuss. He cooed nonsense to her as he buckled her in, talking over the occasional holler or thump from the back of the car. Katinka didn't notice or care much about the ruckus, especially when Nigel fished the bear out of her bag to give her.

Other than when it came to his daughter, Nigel was not a patient man. He was big enough to admit that. By the time he got Katinka fastened in place, he was more than antsy to be on his way. A trickle of the dread and pain he kept locked away tight began to slip through the cracks of his control. The white-hot searing rage building up beneath it all quickly followed.

Before he thought better of it, Nigel gave that rage an outlet when he walked around to the back of the car.

Even with the beating the third man had received, he was still trying to put up a fight. The annoying resilience of someone who wasn't just a moron thinking to take out an easy mark. It reeked of personal investment. He wouldn't stop until Aiden was down, or he was. Nigel helpfully obliged.

Aiden was about to lunge at the man once more, perhaps to try slamming his head against a harder surface, when he stumbled to a stop. He didn't seem to care about the downpour, the flurries on the air. He caught his breath as Nigel came up behind his assailant, hands fitting in the familiar places at the jaw and back of the skull. With a quick, jerking force, the sound of tendons snapping and bones breaking filled the air between them.

And like in the restroom, Aiden watched Nigel with nothing more than a cold kind of regard. He wasn't surprised at the violence, the complete disregard for life. There was no move to finally explain or ask questions that, quite fucking frankly, didn't matter. Nigel took a calming breath before he stooped to search the pockets of the latest bastard who got in his way.

“What are you doing?” Aiden finally snapped out of his trance-like staring. But he wasn't running.

Nigel ignored him for the time being, growing more and more impatient as the seconds ticked by. As he found the keys and anything else of use in the man's pockets, Nigel accepted a hard truth of the moment. Gabi's head start was officially too big to gain on her. For now. All he could do was regroup and come up with a plan that was better than tearing out of the station in a stolen car and hope he was going in the same direction his wife ran.

He started to unlock the trunk and nodded to Aiden. “The best we can do is toss him in here. The rain will take care of the rest.”

Aiden looked about and just then seemed to noticed the obvious signs of a fight. The pool of blood at his feet was already swirling away with the harsh rainfall. They would just have to hope it didn't freeze before it cleared away completely. Pressed for time, Aiden thankfully didn't argue. He came to Nigel, dead man dragged to the trunk for when the dented latch finally released. But when it opened, they both gave pause at the sight that met them.

It was going to be a tight fit.

Nigel took a moment to appreciate the hardware these idiots were carrying around with them. Explosives. Guns. Ammunition. He glanced to Aiden and smirked at the troubled look he was giving the collection. Just what did these assholes have in mind? Blowing up the train? Nigel scoffed at the thought before he grabbed hold of the other half of the body and shoved it to lay as orderly as possible amidst the clutter.

Nigel came to stand before Aiden and pressed the keys into his chilled hand. “You're driving.”

“Where?” Aiden's voice was barely audible above the din of the growing storm.

“It doesn't matter.” Nigel didn't give him a chance to reply as he turned to climb into the passenger seat.

It wasn't long before Aiden joined him. Once again, Nigel had to concede that Aiden wasn't stupid. It wouldn't serve him any purpose to ask questions or delay their departure. He had more to lose than Nigel, if he decided to linger. A set of circumstances Nigel absolutely would take advantage of, and would continue to do so, for as long as he needed. Aiden was silent as he got in the car. Only a moment was taken to peel off his sweater and toss in a sodden heap in the back, white t-shirt damp and not much good against the frigid change in the weather.

They pulled out of the parking lot and into the somewhat dwindling traffic, with no one around them the wiser to what just occurred. There was no hesitancy to Aiden's steering and soon they were on the highway heading north, in a roundabout route following the one they would have traveled had they stayed on the train. Only when the station disappeared from the rearview mirror did Aiden speak.

“Where's Gabi, Nigel?”

Nigel had expected that question eventually and still hadn't come up with a satisfying answer. “Gone.” Aiden glanced his way, a glimpse off the road to pin Nigel with a look of concern. Along with a little healthy suspicion. Nigel couldn't help the small smirk that look evoked. “Wherever she is, she's safe. I assume. She wouldn't plan to leave my ass so spectacularly in the dust, if she didn't also prepare for her well-being.”

Apparently, there was nothing left to say in response to that. Aiden swallowed whatever questions he still had down, trapped behind pink lips he chewed raw as he watched for road signs and signal lights from other vehicles speeding by. That suited Nigel just fine. They might be sharing a car, after sharing a little murder or three, but that didn't make them best friends.

With all the excitement left behind, adrenaline was quick to fade. Every concern and fear Nigel had been able to ignore came back as one emotional tidal wave. An exhaustion felt in his soul was left in its wake. What the fuck just happened? It was unreal how quickly his life changed. In seconds. In a blink. He turned his head away for just a moment and Gabi was gone. Just fucking vanished.

He had no idea where to go. Where to look. Down to his bones he knew Gabi wouldn't be anywhere he might think to search. With a deep breath he willed himself to calm down. Over and over he told himself there wasn't much he could do. At the moment. This was his best shot at fixing things before everything fell further apart. He just had to wait. Hitch a ride and fucking wait.

Well, there was one other thing he could do.

It never did anything but make his anxiety spike building it up. *Just rip it off, like a fucking plaster.* Before he could talk himself out of it, he had his phone out and unfamiliar number dialed. Nigel listened to the tone as he waited for him to pick up with a feeling between dread

and excitement. An anticipation he refused to examine too closely. Three rings before it connected.

*"Hello."*

"Hey." It was still such a novelty, hearing his brother's voice after so long silent.

*"Hello, Nigel. I was expecting your call much later. Is everything all right?"* There was a pause in the slight clatter in the background, as if he had been fiddling with something when the phone rang. *"I haven't heard of any delays from the station."*

"Yeah, about that." Nigel sighed and ran a hand across his face, briskly rubbing in a pitiful attempt to soothe himself. "There's been a change in plans."

*"Oh?"*

"I'm finishing the trip by car. But if you could still go to the station and grab my bags from the train, that'd be great."

There was a moment of assessing silence before, *"Of course. Just yours? Your wife and daughter have their luggage with them?"*

Nigel smiled at his brother's fishing. He'd have to be disappointed, for now. "They're all squared away. Don't worry about that."

*"I'll leave the spare key to my house where you can get to it, in case you arrive here before me."*

"Don't bother. Just head for our uncle's place from the station. It might take a little longer than I first planned, but I'll meet you there."

*"Are you sure everything is fine?"*

Nigel gritted his teeth and relaxed his hold on the phone when he heard it creak under the pressure of his grip. Everything was not fucking fine. And he sure as shit didn't want to go over it all now. "Do this for me. I'll explain everything when I get there. Remember, there should be two bags with my tags on them. I'm not gonna wear your clothes while I'm here."

A sigh came over the connection but he let Nigel's secrecy go. *"Your things will be awaiting you in your old room, when you arrive. I'm sure you will have something to wear for my dinner party amongst the items you packed."*

It was said in that round-about way of his. A question without framing it as a question. In that nagging way of his that Nigel had not missed at all. "Don't worry, I'll be there. I wouldn't dream of ruining your big night."

*"I look forward to seeing you, then—and your beautiful family I've heard so little about."* The change in tone was immediate, cheerful now instead of that hesitant expectation of being disappointed. And what did he have to feel disappointed about? He got his way, after all. Just like when they were fucking kids.

Nigel didn't give that parting comment any response other than a tight farewell. He tossed his phone onto the dashboard with a curse. It was an endurance test whenever he talked with his brother. Talking with him, making plans for a future that was soon to be, was draining. Nigel felt like just that small exchange took five years off his life.

But that part of his future was still hours away. He could distract himself a little while longer. Just like his new found family troubles, there was nothing to do but wait. And just not think about it. The attempt to take his mind off his brother, of Gabi, only made him realize how goddamn miserable his current situation was.

There wasn't much in the car he could use to dry off with. Not even a little box of cheap tissues tucked into a sun visor. He had no spare clothes to change into so instead turned the heat up full-blast and hoped for the best. It took a while to stop shivering and Nigel lost his patience, choosing nicotine over warmth after only a few minutes.

At least his cigarettes stayed dry. He rolled the window down and lit one up. The gray scenery sped by and Nigel grimaced as he blew smoke into the rain. “Christ. I don't know why I expected anything different. A few hours into Lithuania and it's fucking miserable out there. As always. I hope you enjoyed the weather in Bucharest, because it's probably going to fucking snow.”

Aiden met Nigel's stare for a moment before returning his attention to the slick highway. “Not a fan of the somber beauty of your homeland, I take it.”

Cheeky shit.

“No. I put a lot of work and distance between me and this fucking country. I haven't been back in almost thirty years. Should be interesting, if nothing else.” He was given an incredulous little *look* and Nigel settled into his seat, flicking ash out the window. “Something on your mind?”

“Where do I even start?” Aiden scoffed and took a moment of silence to pass an old lady in a Cadillac. “I guess I'm mostly shocked.”

“Are you now?”

“Yes! You're taking it rather well the fact that I brutally murdered two men in a Lithuanian bathroom, beat another one in a parking lot and stole their car. Commentary on the weather wasn't what I expected for our next conversation.” He shrugged and swept damp curls from his eyes. “It makes me wonder what kind of man bums a ride with someone like me. With a kid, no less!”

“Don't forget the assistance I provided.” Nigel smiled around his cigarette as Aiden turned his attention onto the road, not bothering to even thank him. “You know I'm a bad man. You knew before any of this started. I don't think any of what's happened in the last few hours is enough to shock you.”

Aiden laughed at that. “As much as you have that whole mobster kingpin thing going for you, you don't know me. Or what I'm capable of. That back there? I consider that self-defense.

And definitely not the worst thing I've ever done."

Nigel chuckled and marveled at the universe. Out of all the trains. Out of all the bathrooms. "It's always the buttoned-up, quiet ones. The ones with sweet faces and charming smiles that are the ones to watch out for."

His laughter made an answering giggle drift up from the backseat. Nigel turned, babbling in reply to Katinka's chatter while reaching down for the floppy toy she had thrown down in her excitement. When he righted himself, he found Aiden giving him another look he couldn't quite identify.

"You're speaking from personal experience and you're not talking about yourself. Or me."

Nigel chuckled again as he crushed his cigarette in the ashtray between them. He knew monsters. There was something dark and twisted in the world, but it wasn't in that car with them. "You have no idea, wee man."

* * * * *

They were on the road for only an hour but Nigel needed a break. The rain dwindled down to a light sprinkle as their car put miles between them and the bloody scene left behind. At the time, it was still that predawn darkness. An even more foreboding heaviness to stretching black, with the thick clouds overhead. Not even a glimpse of stars to accompany them. Only then was the sun creeping over the horizon, slipping through now and again to diminish some of the gloom.

Nigel needed some goddamn coffee and something other than vending machine nibbles.

"Take this exit," Nigel said into the silence. When they pulled off the highway, he pointed at the first place they approached. "Stop up here."

They eased into a parking spot, the furthest from the small travel stop. Aiden didn't turn the engine off. His hands still gripped the steering wheel as he glanced around before looking to Nigel. "What are we doing here?"

"I'm getting some food. You should top-up while we're here." Nigel rifled through the wallet he took from the idiot in the parking lot. Lots of plastic. Even more cash. Perfect. He waved a wad of euros at Aiden when he still looked at him in question. "For gas and whatever else. No cards. Not right now." He paused opening the door when he noticed Aiden staring at him. "Problems?"

"Quite a few, actually." Aiden scoffed before turning in his seat to face him. "After everything I said earlier, after everything *you saw me do*, you're not planning on finding a different ride any time soon. And you're trusting me with your daughter! I could be some unhinged serial killer! I could just drive off with her!" He sounded on the verge of a panic attack.

Nigel was not scared in the slightest. How could he be? Aiden was like a grumpy, frumpy kitten. He really shouldn't poke but it was all too tempting. Nigel laughed as he opened the

door and got out. “Sure thing, cutie.” Aiden sputtered at that and Nigel turned back into the warmth of the car before he could get a word out. “You drink coffee, yeah? No weird American food allergies I need to know about?”

“Why?” Aiden had the nerve to sound suspicious.

“I'm getting food, while you get gas,” Nigel repeated, slowly, since Aiden seemed confused on the matter at hand.

“You don't have to do that.”

“I'm not doing anything. Breakfast is courtesy of the gentleman we're borrowing the car from.” Aiden seemed to take more offense at the idea of Nigel buying him breakfast than anything else thus far in their relationship. An odd little guy, to be sure. Before he could open his mouth, start in on whatever-the-fuck else he had a problem with now, Nigel cut him off. “Can you read Lithuanian? Can you speak it enough to hold even the slightest conversation? Just sit tight. Fill the tank—it's on that asshole's dime. Lean the seat back. Fucking relax. You know, Aiden, you're awfully uptight for someone who's fine with wholesale violence.”

Nigel shut the door before Aiden could work himself up and reply. It was downright chilly as he made his way across the parking lot but at least it stopped raining for the moment. The bell on the door gave a cheerful jingle as he walked in and the old woman behind the counter welcomed him with a tired greeting. Nigel took a small turn around the place, browsing their wares before wandering back up the front. He smiled as he saw their car was now parked next to a vacant pump. Aiden might be a moody, pissy little shit, but he was proving again and again not to be stupid.

By the time he returned, the car was once more in a space far from the building. Nigel was pleased to see that Aiden took his advice and chilled the fuck out. And he had the wherewithal to give Katinka one of her pacifiers. He took the two coffees Nigel handed him as he settled back into the passenger seat.

“You're in luck. They had decent-looking food. Not everything was stuffed with cabbage and beets. Or smothered in *bacon gravy*.” Nigel shuddered at the thought and tossed Aiden a sandwich wrapped in wax paper.

Something simple to tide them over. Turkey breast on rye. Nigel made quick but meticulous work of examining each layer of his own sandwich. Bread, cheese, meat, lettuce and tomato with a smear of mayo and mustard. Nothing troubling. Predictable and boring. His favorite—if he wasn't the one doing the cooking. If Aiden noticed his search, he wisely kept any comments to himself.

A sandwich and coffee later, Nigel finally felt like indulging his curiosity. All together they had been on the road a few hours. He blew smoke out the window and flicked ashes off the remaining half of his cigarette before he looked at his driver.

“I wasn't too concerned before because we seem to be going the same way, but now I am entirely curious. Where are we going?”

Aiden smiled and took an exit that Nigel noted but didn't comment on. “I assure you, you're not being abducted. There's something I need to do, somewhere I need to go.”

“And after?”

“You're welcome to take the car and go your own way.”

Nigel nodded his understanding and let Aiden drive with no further distractions. No more commentary. No more questions. Honestly, he couldn't bring himself to fucking care. Wherever they ended up, he had a feeling he could count on the unpredictability of it. And that was fine by him.

Chapter End Notes

This marks the end of Part One.

I hope this wasn't a terrible, jumbled mess. I'm having a blast and I really hope you all are too. This has kind of taken the thrown-together-thriller-horror-homecoming-dash-of-romcom trope and flipped it to something with a lot of dark comedy. I've never had a project quite like it but it's been a fun experiment. I'd love to hear from you and let me know what you think.

Til next time!

# Chapter Four

Chapter Notes

Hi, welcome back. Well, that was a pretty awful week since last I posted. I hope anyone reading got some kind of enjoyment out of it. I know I was scrolling the Archive in an attempt to dissociate and self-soothe.

This marks the beginning of Part Two. A somewhat short chapter, but I think it does a lot to set the stage. Right quick, I wanted to thank Seaturtle68, cherryelectric, Katzensprung, persian_blue, Cruel_Irony, DeadProphet77 and HowlinMad for taking the time to leave such lovely comments.

Please enjoy, dear readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Part Two:**

**The Proposal**

## Chapter Four

The drive became a quiet and rather calming ordeal. No more questions or comments—stops for gas or otherwise. Nigel even managed to nod off for a bit, only to be awakened by something as mundane as Katinka making her usual excited noises from the backseat. When he looked to check, the cause for the commotion seemed to stem from her renewed interest in her bear that she threw at him with delight.

A few rounds of hit-daddy-in-the-face was enough to entertain her and wake Nigel further from the intense fog his short nap gave him. Once Katinka was bored of their game and occupied with a fresh pacifier, Nigel took a closer look at their surroundings. Nowhere near following along the train tracks anymore and yet their route was familiar. He couldn't guess as to where Aiden was heading, but it was oddly the same direction Nigel needed to go.

Fortuitous or another ill omen, Nigel couldn't say.

They left most of the rain behind. Black clouds and a sporadic flash of lightning in their rear-view mirror, but the landscape ahead wasn't much brighter. He and Aiden didn't try for conversation and Nigel was grateful for the continued silence. A violent little thing he might be, but it couldn't be said that Aiden was a chatterbox. In fact, his impromptu driver was far too focused on the road to give Nigel any thought at all.

They had left the highway some time ago. While Nigel dozed, Aiden had taken exits and off-ramps and side roads until they were quite a bit from any kind of modern city or even

picturesque hamlet that tourists liked to stop at. He never checked GPS or a map of any kind that Nigel saw, but Aiden knew exactly where he was going. A steady drizzle began to fall again just as Aiden slowed to turn down an overgrown path that Nigel would never have noticed otherwise.

There came a brief apprehension that the car wouldn't make it, that they'd get stuck in mud and brush and have to walk their way out of there, but the tell-tale squelch and squeal of spinning tires never came and they bounced right along until Aiden stopped the car. Without a word, Aiden killed the engine and got out. He pulled on his damp sweater as he approached his destination.

Nigel gazed out the rain-spattered windshield a moment longer before he followed Aiden, taking advantage of the break in driving to stretch his legs and light a cigarette. As curious as he became these last few hours, he found the end of their journey slightly underwhelming.

Miles from anything worth a damn. Feeble rays of sunlight broke through swollen clouds to shine down on scraggly trees and a weed-choked clearing. Slouched in the middle of it all was a decrepit cabin. More a shack, really. Built before the first World War and abandoned since the beginning of the Russian occupation, by the look of it. It didn't even have the decency to be boarded up, as Aiden wandered right in with a tentative push to the rickety door after treading carefully up sagging steps.

The sparse light from the doorway did little to illuminate the inside. Not that Nigel needed to see to know what the state of the interior was. He could smell the mustiness of old and mildewed wood from where he stood leaning against the hood of the car. He enjoyed the rest of his cigarette while he waited. In the middle of fucking nowhere. At a sad little hut, between some sad little trees. No electricity. No running water. And, from a glance at his phone, a completely dead zone.

Aiden didn't seem concerned by any of those details.

Without any kind of an explanation of why they stopped, why *this* was the place he needed to check on, Aiden continued his survey. But then, Nigel didn't need one. From the moment he walked in on bright blood splashed on generic bathroom tile—with the remains of the owner of their borrowed car cooling in the trunk—Nigel had been piecing a story together. He didn't need every sordid detail to know one glaringly obvious truth.

Aiden was in a lot of fucking trouble.

Whatever he was doing in Romania—hell, probably before he landed in Bucharest, of all places—he had to leave it all behind in a hurry. Aiden ran to Lithuania for a dream vacation just as much as Nigel had. It was crystal fucking clear. Bucharest was the perfect place to get lost, hide. But then he ran, and was planning to hide once more. Nigel knew because he was a pro at running and hiding, as well.

Something started to form in Nigel's head. Nothing so sophisticated as a plan, but very nearly there. A ray of fucking light after the grim darkness that seeped into his life, following the departure of his lovely wife. A kernel of thought. A sliver of hope. Absolutely selfish. Unquestionably risky. But when had Nigel ever been anything but selfish and risky? He

smothered the end of his cigarette and tossed it in the ashtray in the car before making his way to sit on the creaking boards that played at being a porch beside Aiden.

“Nice place you got here. I especially like the ditch where an outhouse used to be.” Nigel nodded towards the overgrown area to the right of the field. That won him a meager smile.

“It's not mine. Just borrowing.” Aiden sighed and reached into his back pocket. “I don't really know what to say in situations like this. 'It was nice meeting you, here's the car I promised? Oh, and remember to wipe it of prints when you dump it?'”

“Been in a few spots of bother, have you?”

Aiden snorted as he shook his head. “You'd be surprised.”

“I doubt that.” Aiden offered him the keys to the car and frowned when Nigel made no move to take them. Not yet. He stood up and dusted off his slacks, though it did little good with his clothes getting wet all over again as the drizzle grew heavier. He turned to Aiden and nodded to the car, the dry warmth waiting for them. “Why don't you get in the passenger side, this time, and let me drive the rest of the way?”

Confusion gave way to incredulity, smoothing wrinkles and weariness from a painfully boyish face. It took Aiden barely any time at all to understand what Nigel was getting at. “You want me to come with you?” When Nigel only waited for a more definitive response, he could only gawp at him like a fish. “I can't! Why would you even think to offer that?”

“Why not?” Aiden didn't need to know the *why's*. Nigel's reasons weren't anything for him to worry about, at the moment. Maybe not ever, if this all worked out. “You have something else going on? We both know you don't. And from the looks of things, you plan to *not* have plans for a long time.”

“This isn't my new home, or anything. I just need a place to lay low for a bit.” Aiden tried to smile, perhaps to reassure him, but it came out as more of a shaky little grimace. “Don't worry about me. You don't have to help me anymore.”

“All set, are you?” Nigel scoffed as he looked around them before nodding to the dilapidated cabin. “Leaky roof, and all? This isn't sustainable, Aiden.” He gentled his tone, careful in his coaxing as he would with a spooked animal.

“I don't intend for this to be permanent,” Aiden insisted. If he was trying to convince himself or Nigel, he couldn't say. “I just need a few months. Just three and a half more months. And then this will all be over.”

It was oddly specific, Aiden's deadline. Nigel had another epiphany. “That when she's due?”

Shocked silence built between and around them in the wake of Nigel's words. A simple question. An even more simple answer. Was it because the idea of it was still so novel to him? Spoken into being made it real, perhaps. Or maybe Aiden wasn't used to being read so well. The smartest boy in the room now transparent. Nigel had too much experience dealing

with that type for Aiden to fool him easily. Finally, Aiden nodded to confirm Nigel's suspicions.

“All of this has something to do with that, doesn't it?” Nigel couldn't help pressing.

“It doesn't matter. There's nothing to be done about that, at the moment. I'm here now. This place is just fine, for what I have planned.”

“You really think the best thing to do is stay here?”

“It's the best *I* can do.”

So quick to answer, to assure he had it all under control, but it was just another smokescreen. A lie to himself more than anything else. He could tell Aiden didn't really want to stay here. That kernel of an idea began to grow, unfurl into something Nigel could see better. The reason he found himself reaching out to Aiden in the first place. He decided to push. Just a little. It wouldn't do to scare him off.

“Not any more.” When Aiden glanced up at him again in surprise, Nigel smiled. “That was before you wandered onto the same train as me.”

That was the clincher. The idea of sharing something. Camaraderie between them. Manipulation came easy for Nigel. Always had. He learned from his brother since practically the womb that some things were easier won with honey. A connection forged out of blood. That would appeal to Aiden. Fear or promises of money wouldn't do it for him. But the promise of not being alone in this? That was Aiden's price that Nigel would offer to pay gladly, no questions asked.

“Why are you helping me,” Aiden asked, bewildered. As if he couldn't quite understand why anyone would put so much effort into him.

A good manipulation always worked because there was a little bit of truth woven into the sell. Nigel decided to be honest. “I don't really know. Let's just say it's like sensing like and leave it at that.” He sighed and slipped his hands into his pockets as he waited for Aiden to make his decision. “I don't do this for just anyone, Aiden. Let me help.”

“I can't ask you to do more than you already have.”

“You haven't asked for anything yet, technically. I'm the one who bummed a ride, after all. Call this paying back a favor.”

“You don't like owing people.”

“I imagine we're just alike in that regard.” They shared a smile.

Aiden was weakening to the idea, especially since the drizzle began to grow heavier. As a last attempt to dissuade Nigel, he said, “I think we're too much alike. I'm dangerous, Nigel. I attract bad people. Do you really want to invite that in? Have that around your family? Katinka?”

How noble of him. It wasn't an unfair detail to bring up. However, it shocked a laugh out of Nigel just considering it. This fucking boy. “Oh, Aiden. If I wasn't confident in my ability to protect my family, I wouldn't have bothered taking things this far. I would have killed you—along with that fucking idiot in the parking lot—if I thought you were a threat to me.” Before he could argue, he added, “This is an opportunity. Unforeseen, but an opportunity all the same. Take it.”

“For me, or for *you*?”

Too clever for his own fucking good. They shared another laugh as Nigel hauled him up from the step. “That remains to be seen.”

Their mirth was short-lived. The humor faded fast from Aiden's features as he looked at Nigel. He seemed to gather himself as he took his glasses off to tuck into his pocket. “There's something I need to tell you.”

“Other than what you told me on the train? More than what has to do with what we left at the station?” Nigel always grew a little impatient when he could sense a deal going through. Not that he wasn't interested; more information was never something to turn down. It was just that he was getting cold, Katinka was probably working herself up at being left alone and it was fucking raining again. What couldn't be said in the car? With the heater blowing full-blast?

“Yes.”

“I'm quickly becoming your closest friend and confidant, Aiden. I'm touched.”

Aiden's smile was enough to make an old lady cry and without any more of a lead-in, he said, “That's just it: my name isn't Aiden.”

That wasn't quite what Nigel was expecting and it shocked a chuckle out of him. “No shit? Just how much fucking trouble are you in? Are you in some kind of witness protection, or something?”

“Actually, that's not too off from what's going on. My name is Will Graham.” He sighed and took a step closer to Nigel. “The woman I told you about? My friend that I...helped? Margot. Her family's old. Old money. With a number of skeletons in their closet large enough to fill a cemetery. She wanted to get away from that, have a child and a chance to have something not tainted by her relatives. But helping Margot made me a bigger threat to her brother than I already was. Things quickly spiraled out of control, once Mason figured out what Margot was planning.”

“How far out of control?”

“Enough that I left the States with a body count behind me. I couldn't kill Mason, but he didn't get away unscathed before I ran. I haven't been home in almost a year. I was laying low in Romania, waiting for Margot to get closer to the end of her pregnancy, when she called me two nights ago.”

“She got made?” It struck a chord in Nigel, the story being laid out for him. A picture painted that resembled parts of his own past. If he hadn't been the one to offer help in the first place, he might have suspected manipulation against himself. Still, he couldn't help caring about the fate of this faceless woman, or the baby she carried.

“Yes. She knew to run. We'd been over it so many times. I don't know where she is now—and I won't for at least another week. Just in case they found me too. So, now you know most everything. I need you to understand what you're potentially inviting into your life. And if the offer still stands, I would like to accept it. But I need you to know: at the end of all this, I am going to kill Mason. And anyone else he throws in my way.”

What was meant as a final warning only served to cement Nigel's opinion.

“I would expect nothing less. It's nice to meet you, Will.” Nigel stepped close to take his hand in a firm shake. Their bargain struck. He smiled as he led the way back to the car. “And now there's something that *I* need to tell *you*.”

Chapter End Notes

One of the things I've been having fun with is all the different ways I can reveal details throughout this series. I know this is all well-worn territory. I hope you all are enjoying this version. :D Until next time!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!